



Larry Hogan, Governor · Boyd K. Rutherford, Lt. Governor · Dennis R. Schrader, Secretary

Behavioral Health Administration
55 Wade Ave., Dix Bldg., SGHC
Catonsville, MD 21228

May 5, 2021

Dear Behavioral Health Directors and Medical Directors,

At the Maryland Department of Health (MDH) Behavioral Health Administration (BHA), we believe that behavioral health providers are vital in the effort to get through this pandemic, to help Marylanders reach herd immunity, and secure a successful recovery.

In late April 2021, the percentage of Marylanders fully vaccinated passed 30%, slightly above the national prevalence. Daily vaccinations increased throughout most of April, exceeding 94,000 a day statewide, and nationally, exceeding four million a day twice. Unfortunately, even as eligibility expanded to everyone 16 years old and over, this momentum slowed. Now projections indicate that supply could exceed the demand for vaccines as soon as late May. Declining vaccinations will delay the estimated 80% vaccination rate required for herd immunity — and raises the possibility that herd immunity could be unachievable.

Addressing barriers to vaccine access and vaccine hesitancy have now taken on even greater importance. Overcoming vaccine hesitancy becomes more difficult for those struggling with behavioral health illnesses if combined with vaccine access barriers such as the digital divide, not owning a car, the cost of transportation, or not having a primary care provider. The presence of many behavioral health illnesses increases the risk of becoming infected with COVID-19, and individuals with a schizophrenia or an opioid use disorder diagnosis have a significantly increased risk for death from COVID-19.

Because behavioral health providers are trusted voices in providing care, they may also be trusted on the decision of whether or not to get vaccinated. If someone who is hesitant is persuaded to accept the vaccine, the ability to then immediately administer the vaccine is invaluable. Many behavioral health providers already have nursing staff who give flu vaccinations or injections of long-acting medications.

Given the importance of vaccination and the impact you can provide as a trusted voice, BHA is requesting that your program explore becoming a vaccination site, and if you can meet the requisite requirements to provide vaccinations, that you do so.

To receive vaccine doses, providers **will first need to register with Maryland's Immunization Information System (ImmuNet). The vaccines themselves are free from the federal government, but providers can submit claims for vaccine administration. The codes used are the same as existing somatic vaccine codes.** Providers who already bill somatic codes through an MCO should use that mechanism. Only those behavioral health providers who are not paneled with MCOs should submit claims (no authorization needed) through the Optum Maryland ASO. Please note that while the vaccines may be administered as soon as providers become eligible, **claims should be held** until a Provider Alert from Optum Maryland declares the system active, as required systems and codes are still being implemented.

For more information, find the ImmuNet Quick Reference Guides at: https://phpa.health.maryland.gov/OIDEOR/IMMUN/Pages/quick_ref_guides.aspx. Questions about the program can be emailed to mdh.mdimmunet@maryland.gov.

Thanks to those who registered in ImmuNet and have already administered vaccinations.

Additional Information:

- To find a vaccination clinic at a hospital, local health department, or pharmacy, go to coronavirus.maryland.gov/pages/vaccine#locator.
- To register at a mass vaccination site, go to coronavirus.maryland.gov/pages/vaccine, or register by phone through the state's COVID-19 vaccination support center at 1-855-MD-GOVAX (1-855-634-6829).
- Vaccine data and FAQs are found at covidvax.maryland.gov.
- Educational materials from MDH and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to provide individuals and post in waiting rooms, some of which are available in multiple languages, are found at covidlink.maryland.gov/content/vaccine/resources and in the [CDC COVID-19 Vaccination Communication Toolkit](#).
- BHA vaccine webinars are also posted on the [BHA COVID-19 page](#).
 - March 30 Webinar: [Addressing Vaccine Hesitancy that You, Your Colleagues, or Those in Your Care May Have](#)
 - April 26 Webinar: [Strategies for Providers to Increase Vaccine Uptake](#)

Thank you for all that you do.

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